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# valuable homework

bruce d. nagel gathers helpful information  
from clients' writing assignments

by ginny demille  
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**W**hen you think about it, he's right: A home is like a living organism. Architect Bruce D. Nagel approaches his residential projects from that interesting observation. As the basic premise in his comparison, he says, "You've got to get the bones right. You can dress the house however you want, but you've got to start with good functional and spatial relationships. That's the soul of the house."

Nagel believes that successful residential design starts from the inside out. "You've got to live inside the house," he says. In order to produce a design for a home that will suit the

*Water cascades over all four sides of the pool, lending a placid, mirror-like quality to reflect the grandeur of the Mediterranean-style home in the Hamptons.*

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lifestyle and needs of his clients, he wants to know how they're going to live and inhabit the spaces.

Nagel has found that the best way to find out what his clients want is for them to imagine what their day is like, what they notice, what they enjoy, how they will use each room, and how they will move through each day in their new home. The architect has developed a novel idea for drawing that information from his clients. He asks them to write a short story of how they see themselves living in their new home.

"I ask clients to write a narrative of their day in the home, using adjectives to describe in as much detail as they can," Nagel explains. From the writing assignment, he can discern important design and layout considerations. For example, he recommends what kind of bathroom would best suit the clients' morning routine. Will it be a double sink — or a double bathroom? Knowing these kinds of preferences and designing accordingly can make for peace or cause subtle, yet unnecessary conflict.

According to Nagel, the most informative and detailed narratives are those that are more than just lists of what people think they want in their new house. "People tend to think in lists — three bedrooms, two baths, family room, and so on," he noted. Some people have trouble thinking through in specific detail what they really want and need in a home. The best narrative Nagel has seen so far was written by the daughter of a playwright. "She had so much detail, so much vivid description, so much feeling and emotion in the written piece. As she described walking down the hallway with the dappled sunlight reflected on the floor, I knew right

away where to place the hallway and how to position the windows, to realize her vision," he said.

### the process is personal

A good relationship with your architect is crucial to being able to communicate what you want and being satisfied with the result. "You have to like your architect, just as you do your doctor," Nagel said. "You need to value your architect's opinions and trust his recommendations. And beyond respecting his experience, you have to be able to discuss some of the personal aspects of your everyday life. It's a personal process."

For example, when Nagel learns that a client does not particularly enjoy mornings, he will not locate the master bedroom on the east side of the house where the bright morning sun will be a

*From the living room of this gorgeous Hamptons' home, look up at the bridge spanning above. The floor of the bridge, made of glass block panels, create a dramatic lighting effect.*



Photos: Mark Samu



*above – Curving glass block forms the shower wall in the master bath, with clear glass at just the height so one standing in the shower has a beautiful panoramic view of the adjacent bay.*

*below – When Bruce Nagel learned the owners of their new property in Bridgehampton particularly liked the rural farm acreage, he suggested this stylized barn motif.*

shocking jolt to that person's day. Or if a client prefers a king-size bed, windows will be positioned accordingly so the furniture fits well in the room.

Commenting on the functionality of his designs, Nagel added, philosophically, "Furniture should have a home."

After pulling the necessary information about the client's goals, wants, and needs for the project, Nagel then looks at the site and talks with the client about how the structure will relate to the terrain, the lot, and the neighborhood. Working within the



client's budget, he creates a design to satisfy all the requirements and fulfill the dream.

### **build on two foundational theories**

"I work with two fundamental theories in architecture," Nagel stated. "One, I am interested in the phenomenon of procession, the 'promenade.'" How this works is he examines the series of episodic events that take people through an architectural space. He visualizes each phase of the process. How will people approach the property? What will they see in relationship to neighboring homes, and how will they perceive the structure and the entrance? He imagines a visitor stepping onto the front walkway, proceeding up to the front door, how the door opens and then entering the home.

Each of these steps is part of the procession to and through the home. He reviews all the sensory stimuli that combine in the architectural design to give people certain sensations. Is the foyer floor a black and white marble tile? If so, it will convey a certain formality, will feel smooth and polished, and will give back a certain distinct sound with each footstep.

Another unique design aesthetic that serves as a foundation for Nagel's work compares architecture to a stage set design. "Architectural design evokes feeling," he noted. "Your home is where you play your life out, and your home forms the stage, the backdrop for your life. When people invite others — family, friends, and guests — into their home, these guests become the audience, and the home is the

stage. The design should fit the owner's personality. If you're a vibrant, dynamic, outgoing personality, your home — that is, your stage set — should match. It should also be vibrant, dynamic and bold."

### **better than a barn**

It's the interview, questions and answers that reveal the basic, inner values and personalities for Nagel to create a fitting stage for his clients to live harmoniously in the home he designs. He tells of a client

who hired him to design a home for a new lot, adjoining farm acreage that was used as a horse stable.

The client had brought a preconceived idea of the style of house he thought he wanted. "What did you like most about the lot when you bought it?" Nagel asked the owner. In the ensuing conversation, Nagel learned that it was the peaceful, adjacent farm that especially appealed to his client. Farm . . . barn. And now, this client is contentedly enjoying his new abode, a beautifully stylized barn-like home with a pond out front.

**award-winning architect**

Nagel has obviously come up with a residential design strategy that works. In his 32 years designing homes on Long Island, primarily on the East End, he has garnered an impressive list of awards. These include awards and distinction from the Long Island Chapter of the American Institute of Architects, Architectural Record, Architectural Digest, House Beautiful, and Country Living Dream Homes. Dan's Papers selected Nagel six times as the "Best Architect."

While Nagel thrives professionally and personally in the residential arena, he is also accomplished in institutional and commercial architecture. Beyond residential architecture, he takes only those projects that he deems have a cultural and/or social value. Thus, he and his firm, composed of six full-time architects plus support staff, include such institutional and commercial projects as colleges, nursery schools, churches, synagogues, and golf clubs. In this genre are such project names as Whitmore Early Childhood Learning Center, East Hampton; Atlantic Golf Club, Bridgehampton; Girl Scouts of Nassau County; and The Country (Nursery) School, East Hampton.



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